

## Anthropology of Buddhism: The Importance of Personal Spiritual Maturity and Vital Aims

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to show the views of the major schools of Buddhism towards the notion of an individual in Buddhism. The problem of the human person in Buddhism is reflected through the perception of human desires and aspirations as the sources of “suffering”. Essential Buddhism is not only a religion or philosophy - it is also a school of psychology. The concept of identity in the basic schools of thought in Buddhism can be adequately understood only in the perspective of Buddhist soteriology. The article substantiates the position that attitude to the ontological status of the essential core of the person is the main differentiating feature, which separates Buddhist schools in philosophically and psychologically and determines their soteriological features. The concept of personality was examined in six main directions of Buddhism. Special attention is paid to specific attitude to the identity in Prasangika school of thought. As the result of comparative analysis, tendencies of the development of personality concept in Buddhism were established.

### KEYWORDS

Buddhism, religion, philosophy, anthropology, personality concept.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

The place and role of the individual in the world's religions remains a very important issue, as the intensification of the processes of inter-religious and cross-cultural interaction leads to the fact that the traditional practice of personal identity and socialization do not work anymore. In this regard, Buddhism is a unique religion because of its anthropological component. Due to its specific characteristics, Buddhism can be considered not as a religious or philosophical movement, but as a psychological school (Mikulas, 2007). Anthropological principle of Buddhism begins with its founder – Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) (Armstrong, 2011). Unlike other religious figures, Buddha never claimed that he was more than a man; he did not say that he was God incarnate in a human body (Rāhula, 1974). Since the Buddha was just a man, the state of “enlightenment”, which he has achieved, is accessible to all people. There are no major formal religion attributes in Buddhism; there is no God or deified nature, no canons and dogmas, there is no redemption, and no “savior”, Buddhism does not force its followers to “believe” in anything (Snelling, 1991; Nyanaponika, 1965). Buddhism is rather a set of spiritual practices, and everyone assure themselves in their usefulness, if he wishes it. Consequently,

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the Buddha did not strive to create the religion, and the Buddhist community was beyond religion and had a teaching orientation.

Buddha avoided metaphysical issues to the same extent; the essence of being, spirit and world were not interest for him. He believed that the philosophizing brings nothing good to the person in his Way. He thought that the purification of life and training of mind are more important.

The main objective of Buddhism is to reduce human suffering (De Silva, 2000). This emphasizes the anthropological principle of Buddhism and psychology once again. Buddhism considers a man in natural terms. Humankind seemed to be fettered in an assemblage of desires and aspirations, which are equally based on biology and psychology. That is exactly why Buddhism is characterized by positive and objective attitude towards all living beings (Levine, 2011). The man and the process of its development, which includes enlightenment is a core value for Buddhists.

### Literature review

Buddhist traditions are more than 2,500 years old, and all this time they were free from dogmatism and conservatism incident to religions (Johansen & Gopalakrishna, 2006). The practice of Buddhism is the way of constant self-improvement and self-testing. Buddhists follow a practical but challenging for achieving doctrine of “Middle Way”, the path between any extremes in any sphere. The fundamental principles of Buddhism contribute to effective decision-making on a personal level (Sirodom et al., 2014).

In the anthropological orientation of Buddhism, the universalist tendencies and moral experience of Indian civilization are united (Jazykovich, 2011). Being addressed to the person, Buddhism emphasizes the perspective of human existence through the ability to achieve an enlightened, the highest state, which has precedence of all other forms of existence (Karpickij, 2013).

Buddhism is able to overcome ethnic, cultural and even religious barriers, as it is addressed to a certain person and is able to respond to the psychological and moral needs of people from distinctly different social and cultural groups (Lenkov, 2014).

The fundamental principles of Buddhist culture are tolerance, humanity, openness, readiness for conflict-free interaction with other cultures. Buddhism highly evaluates the human potential, considering human as the only being capable of spiritual self-development. The attainment of nirvana is an ideal of spiritual development and the goal of all Buddhist practices (Funtusov, 2007).

In Buddhism, terminology, marking identity, personality, and the “I” refers not only to a man, but also to all living beings having consciousness (sems can). The list includes six categories of creatures of the desire realm: (‘dod khams) – gods, asuras, humans, animals, preta, inhabitants of hells, beings from the form realm (gzugs khams) and the formless realm (gzugs med khams) (Murti, 2013).

Some of these concepts are found in the literature of the sutras, in other words their development refers to a quite early period of Buddhist thought (such as atman = bdag, pudgala = jiva), others appeared rather late as a result of the development of the concept of lack of selfhood in the commentary literature, especially in the Tibetan. With the improving of the philosophical analysis of the “I” problem some of the terms, marking the individuality, have disappeared from

philosophical discourse, their semantic fields lose their certainty, and they are used almost interchangeably. With the development of Mahayana, which asserts selflessness (anatma = bdag med) not only of the individual (pudgala = gang zad), but also of the phenomena (dharma=chos), the main focus of the analysis was to consider selflessness as property, common as for the individual as for the phenomena (Gombrich, 2006).

In the Indian Buddhism, the main controversy was conducted between representatives of the Mahayana and Hinayana (as Mahayanists started to call schools of the previous period), adepts of Madhyamaka and Vijnanavada, Madhyamika-Svatantrika and Madhyamika-Prasangika. The philosophical literature of Indian Buddhism, preserved in the originals or Tibetan or Chinese translations, gives us a notion about the main directions of this dispute, though, as we can judge from the historical literature, a great number of texts have been lost.

### ***Aim of the Study***

Having considered the views of various Buddhist schools on the personality and the problems of its development, the evolution of ideas about the identity of Buddhism was explicated.

### ***Research questions***

How did the anthropological principle of Buddhism change in the course of time?

### ***Methods***

The complex nature of the problem has predetermined a comprehensive methodology, which includes semiotic and hermeneutic theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of Buddhism, as well as the methods of historical and philosophical reconstruction, structural and functional methods, philosophical and theological analysis of the published literature, contextual analysis.

### ***Results***

Personological Buddhist doctrine has arisen as a result of the controversy with substantial views on the personality, which was developed in orthodox religious and philosophical schools of Hinduism. Critical analysis of these views is found in the Sutras, where the full or partial citation of the twelve, and sometimes more terms, is made, marking a person as a subject of activity (ayatana = byed pa po'i skye mched). This is also evident in the works of orthodox and heterodox Indian philosophical systems:

- 1) I – atman (bdag po);
- 2) the individual – pudgala (gang zag);
- 3) the vital essence – jiva (srog);
- 4) the spirit – purusa (skyes bu);
- 5) the conscious one – sattva (sems can);
- 6) the movable one (gso ba);
- 7) the raised one (gso ba);

- 8) the powerful one (shed can);
- 9) the ruler (shed bdag);
- 10) the performer (byed pa po);
- 11) the one who feels (tshor ba po);
- 12) the knowing one (shes pa po);
- 13) the seeing one (mthong pa po);
- 14) the enjoyer (za ba po).

Therefore, the followers of Vaisheshika and Vedanta refer to “I” (atman), followers of Samkhya – to the spirit (purusa), Jains – to the vital essence (jiva). Concepts of the subject, developed in these schools are considered by the Central Asian erudit monks in “siddhanta” (grub mtha’) – the works on the history of philosophy. The followers of Sankhya endow purusa with five gunas or properties (yon tan); and the followers of Vaisheshika outline nine gunas of atman. What is regarded as a subject under different names in the schools of non-Buddhists (mu stegs can), the Buddhists usually qualify with the word “I” and believe that its all features can be summarized in three main “I”: (1) permanent (eternal); (2) one; (3) independent (bdag ni rtag gcig rang dbang can gsum).

From this perspective, the concept of “I” has three extraordinary teachings (khyad chos) (Gellner, 1990):

- 1) a constant, eternal thing (rtog pa’i dugos po) (i.e. something real, opposable to unreal, illusory);
- 2) the one who has no parts, one, singular (cha med kyi gcig pu);
- 3) the one endowed with autonomy and independence ruling over skandhas (phung po la bdag sgyur ba po’i rang can).

Buddhists believe that if “I” was completely absent, then there would be no subject of salvation, and at the same time, this argument has its own characteristics in each of the schools of Buddhism.

An analysis of the sources allowed us to determine six basic interpretations of the individual in the various schools of Buddhism (McMahan, 2008; Bechert & Gombrich, 1991).

1. Followers of Sammitīya believe that if a personality is rejected, excellent and independent from the skandhas, psychophysical assemblage, than five skandhas should be recognized as the personality. This approach caused a lot of disputes. Therefore, if the person is skandhas, than you have to admit that there were other individuals (not only “I”), because other skandhas were in past lives. Although, this contradicts uncommon expression of Buddha in the Sutras. He said, “At that time, in those days I was somebody”. The law of karma is also should be ignored, as the results of acts committed by one person, will be “experienced” by another one. In addition, the skandhas emerge and collapse every moment, they are changing all the time. It means, that a person, lacking invariant core, would be different in every moment, which also leads to a rejection of the law of karma. Some followers of Vaibhashika consider as a person only the assemblage of skandhas (tshogs tsam). In the same way, that forest is not a single tree, but their assemblage, as well as the person is not five separate skandhas, but their combination and unity. However, the assemblage

does means something distinct from its parts, which can be considered an argument "for" at a glance of Sammitiya.

2. Followers of Pudgalavada consider as a personality "pure consciousness" (sems gcig bu), which also causes controversy. Consciousness is characterized by volatility, which leads to the denial of the law of karma. Thus, since it denies the idea of the personality as a different from skandhas and identical to skandhas or one of them ("pure consciousness"), then such a personality should be conventionally recognized either absent or present. If the first case is true, we have to reject the idea of the individual in general, as well as the law of karma, the path of liberation. Moreover, it would be necessary to recognize, that eating, drinking, engaging in various works are unneeded, because elementary there is no one who does it. In this case, while the individual is denied, it exists substantiality, it should be also considered as existing figuratively. For example, no one will deny that the human body exists. However, it exists only in connection and in relation to its parts; it is not found outside and apart from them.

3. Kashmiri (kha che ba) followers of Vaibhashika and Sautrantika, "following an authoritative texts", recognize the individual flow of skandhas (rgyud). This refers to the fact that the flow (santana) of moments of the skandhas existence serves as "the basis of recognizing" of existing figuratively individual, and as "the basis of denomination" with the name of "individual". Although skandhas continuously change, and in the process of transformation, one skandha is being replaced by another one, but the flow of moments of their existence is not being interrupted, it remains the same. The followers of Prasangika deny the admissibility of "birth" dharma, not only in absolute terms but also in terms of relative truth. The form of the existence of dharmas is called the flow, and it is characterized by the fact that previous dharma moments generate the next, while being mutually different. The followers of Prasangika deny the possibility of such flow, even in relative terms. If the idea of flow is unacceptable, the accepted thought should be rejected in connection and in relation to the flow.

4. The followers of Sautrantika and Vijnanavada, "following evidences", as well as Yogacara-Madhyamaka-Svatantrika and most supporters of the ideas Bhāvaviveka (the founder of Svatantrika), consider the individual "mental consciousness" or "conceivable mind" – manovijnana (yid kyi rnam shes). In their view, Vijñāna gets the existence. This approach aroused criticism. While entering a trance samahita or a special kind – samapatti, absorption of cessation (gog snyoms), mental elements and consciousness are in complete absence. Thus, while being in trance, manas-vijnana and, accordingly, kleshas and karma would be lacking.

5. The followers of Vijnanavada, "following an authoritative texts", and some followers of Madhyamaka-Svatantrika consider an individual as alaya-vijnana (basic consciousness). A lot of people deny the possibility of the existence of the alaya-vijnana, even in relative terms, believing that this term in the Sutras is conventionally used for sunyata – the forlornness of own essence. In addition, the alaya-vijnana refers to a category of consciousness, and consciousness with the psychic elements are absent in the samahita trance state. The question that has to be answered is – where are kleshas and karma at this time?

Supporters of manovijnana and alaya-vijnana argue that in that period, only “rough” consciousness is missing, but there is a “thin” consciousness in the form of wisdom, directly involved in the absolute. This wisdom is described as undissipated (*zag med*). Therefore, there should be no vicious – *kleshas* and *karma*. For example, if we assume what the followers of Svatantrika do during *samahita*, *kleshas* are not in the mind due to incomplete set of causes and conditions necessary for their appearance. However, during the process of leaving the trance, *kleshas* arise again, and this idea seems unacceptable also, because the absence of *kleshas* and other things would not differ a person from the Buddha.

6. The followers of Prasangika believe that if a person, on the one hand, is not *skandhas* or do not differs from them, and on the other – cannot be considered as absent, the person would be “just a name”. In addition, its conditional existence is recognized in connection and relation to *skandhas* (*phung po la brten nas gdags pa*). The followers of Prasangika conclude that the *skandhas* are “basis for admitting” the personality, the thing in connection and in relation to which it is recognized, and a personality is a *dharma* recognized in connection and in relation to it. This *dharma* they generally call “mere notion of I” (*nga tsam*), where the word “mere” (*tsam*), is added in order to distinguish it from “I” (*bdag*), which they consider entirely absent. Though such an individual exists, but not by his own *esse*, indication and being.

The evolution of Buddhism ontological views led to the development of views on the person. Initially, Buddhism, denying the existence of the personality as a single, eternal and independent substance (which found expression in *anatman* concept – *bdag med*), considered the personality as a stream of a range of psychophysical factors (*chos*). The flow is developed by an inertia of antecedent actions (*las*), and these factors were designated as a substance. This position had been predominant, but in the course of the evolution of the Buddhist doctrines, the idea of the personality being a separate substance, and ideas about the presence of all the substantial bearers constituting the objective world were dismissed.

The denial of self-existent being, and the adoption of nominalism were the next stages in the development of philosophical thought of Buddhism. The most logical expression of those ideas were found in the teachings of Madhyamaka-Prasangika. Personality is interpreted as a construct formed on the path of life, and the “way of salvation” (i.e., secondary socialization in Buddhist subculture) is expounded as a consistent reflection, allowing to overcome attitudes formed on the basis of false personal identity and to get rid of frustration. The interpretation of personality as a construct, and the deconstruction as enlightenment which has non-signed character, are the theoretical basis of its openness. This approach to the personality in Buddhism has a long history of practical application in different historical conditions. The approach allowed the followers of Buddhism to adapt effectively to the changing social and cultural conditions in all stages of its historical development.

The followers of Prasangika consider the absolute truth as authentic, and the relative truth, in their opinion is the same absolute, but it is neither examined not analyzed (*ma brtags ma dpyad*) and exists in the highest sense. In the latter case, the true is taken in ontological terms as a kind of current reality. Therefore, they provisionally accept the relative truth as ordinary consciousness



of temporal beings. The perception of the being is caused by ignorance; and it recognizes the truth of the existence. Moreover, to a certain extent, for the mind, which has purified from the kleshas of the saint, whose perception in the period of sojourn in samahita is influenced by “past perception” (vasana), the specified type of ignorance is removed from the consciousness after cessation of vasana.

A twofold interpretation of fundamental Buddhist philosophizing principle of the middle (dbu ma nyid) by the followers of Prasangika reflected in the foregoing. The principle has the denial form (dgag phyogs nas). It can be presented in the statement “where A does not exist, and B does not exist” (here A and B are mutually exclusive dharmas, for example, real – unreal). The form of affirmation (sgrub phyogs nas) is expressed by the principle of nondualism (gnyis med) “where A and B exist”.

The first statement allows to go beyond the relativity to the absolute, and the second statement allows to be engaged in philosophizing, creating concepts, which would adequately describe things of existence and provide a pillar of the orientation in this world.

Taking into account the problem of the definition of “real – unreal” the followers of Prasangika make a distinction between “real” and “real due to its own existence”, “unreal” and “unreal due to its own existence”. At the same time, the concepts of “real”, “existing conditionally” and “being in evidence in connection and in relation” are equivalent. From this perspective, a personality is defined as existing personality apart from its own being. Upon that, the individual existence appears in the middle between the authentic existence and absolute non-existence. Such an existence is the most representative by the formula “the common name of an existing conditionally” (ming rkyang btags yod).

When in the shadows the circinate rope appears as a snake, then this “snake” is appraised as absent “for its part” (on-site the rope). Therefore, such a “snake” can be described as a “common name”, and its existence is acceptable to considered as a nominal – “it can be recognized only because of having the name” (ming gi tha snyad pas btags tsam bzhag). Considering that there is no snake, but the subject has the perception of the snake, it is obvious that such a perception should be classified as conceptual (dzin rtog) and characterized as involved notion of the snake. Therefore, the existence of this “snake” reasonably should regarded as “something considered in virtue of conceptual admitting” (rtog pas btags tsam bzhag).

The followers of Prasangika considered everything missing “for its part”, so they recognize everything as “simple names”. However, the things have a fundamental difference from the “snake”; their existence is not refuted by empirically true knowledge (pramana). In the case of the “snake”, it is better to come closer, to illuminate the object and make sure that it is only a rope. What is not refuted by the true knowledge is called authentic. The authentic thing is supposed to be real and to be able to perform a function. Nevertheless, the empirically true knowledge maps the phenomenon of the thing as such (because it does not exist for its part), but a thing “based on the phenomenon” (snang gzhi). Therefore, the existence of things is defined as relative and occurring only in terms of relativity (kun rdzob tu, tha snyod du).

## Discussion and Conclusions

This approach is treated as a principle of middle. It avoids extremes of existence and non-existence. Thuswise, the personality is the existing conventionally dharma, supposed to be the “common name”. As an existing thing, it belongs to the category of non-consciousness “connectors” (*viprayukat-samskara*), because it is established by the empirically true knowledge, and is able to perform certain functions, does not have its own signs of physical or mental and can take place in a situation of lack of consciousness and psychic elements (*samahita* trance). Existing conditionally, the personality is considered to be recognized in connection and in relation to *skandhas* that determine its main features (Gellner, 2001).

When a person associates oneself with holistic material *skandha* (including both external and internal objects) in terms of tribal relations and social status, it defines oneself as *Shakya* and *Kshatriya*. If a person associates oneself in relation to the mind, than it defines oneself as a monk and saint *srotāpanna*. Since the personality has any differences from the *skandhas*, it can be considered as man, *Shakya*. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is not identical to *skandhas*, it would remain the same personality. Such a personality should be described as “the owner of parts”, of the separate “I”s. At the same time, once a person has any differences from *skandhas*, it might possess signs of *skandhas* – birth, being and destruction. If “I” was different from the fickle *skandas*, it also seemed to be something constant, permanent. Within the concept of permanent, single and separate “I”, or the concept of independent and existing substantively “I” such phenomena appears to be unacceptable, since a single entity, independent from *skandhas*, cannot represent few individuals at a time. However, inasmuch as “I” is not identical to these *skandhas*, the existence of the personality common to all these private individuals, taking place at the same time is quite possible. Thus, the actual circumstances cannot be reduced to the formula: only one set of *skandhas* is only one personality (at the same time). Although, there are many sets of *skandhas* and a lot of their respective personalities in this case, at the same time there is a combined entity that unites them all. On the other hand, the case when the same personality appears simultaneously in connection with different sets of aggregates in the same place is also pointed out.

From the study of the views of Buddhist schools on the personological problems, the problem of attitudes and perceptions of the personality in Buddhism was revealed. We can conclude that the concept of personality in the basic philosophical directions of Indian Buddhism (*Vaibhashika*, *Sautrantika*, *Vijnanavada*, *Madhyamaka*) in their Tibetan edition, as well as in the schools of Tibetan Buddhism can only be adequately examined in the perspective of Buddhist soteriology. The article substantiates the position that attitude to the ontological status of the essential core of the person is the main differentiating feature, which separates Buddhist schools in philosophically and psychologically and determines their soteriological features.

Personological Buddhist doctrine has arisen as a result of the controversy between the schools about the views on the personality, which was developed in orthodox religious and philosophical schools of Hinduism.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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